Dispiriting numbers

The United States has become a nation of entitlement takers.

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The election eve mood is tinged with sadness stemming from well-founded fear that America's new government is subverting America's old character. President Obama's agenda is a menu of temptations intended to change the nation's social norms by making Americans comfortable with the degradation of democracy. This degradation consists of piling up public debt that binds unconsenting future generations to finance current consumption.

So argues Nicholas Eberstadt, an economist and demographer at American Enterprise Institute, in "A Nation of Takers: America's Entitlement Epidemic." This booklet could be Mitt Romney's closing argument.

Beginning two decades after the death of Franklin Roosevelt, who would find today's government unrecognizable, government became a geyser of entitlements. In 2010, government at all levels transferred more than $2.2 trillion in money, goods and services to recipients -- $7,200 per individual, almost $29,000 per family of four.

Before 1960, only in the Depression years of 1931 and 1935 did federal transfer payments exceed other federal expenditures. During most of FDR's 12 presidential years, income transfers were a third or less of federal spending. But between 1960 and 2010, entitlements exploded from 28 percent to 66 percent of federal spending. By 2010, more than 34 percent of households were receiving *means-tested* benefits.

Republicans were more than merely complicit, says Eberstadt: "The growth of entitlement spending over the past half-century has been distinctly greater under Republican administrations than Democratic ones. Between 1960 and 2010, the growth of entitlement spending was exponential -- but in any given year, it was on the whole over 8 percent higher if the president happened to be a Republican rather than a Democrat. ... The Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and

George W. Bush administrations presided over especially lavish expansions of the entitlement state."

Why, then, should we expect Romney to reverse Republican complicity? Because by embracing Paul Ryan, Romney embraced Ryan's emphasis on the entitlement state's moral as well as financial costs.

As evidence of the moral costs, Eberstadt cites the fact that means-tested entitlement recipience has not merely been destigmatized, it has been celebrated as a basic civil right. Hence the stunning growth of supposed disabilities. The normalization and then celebration of dependency help explain the "unprecedented exit from gainful work by adult men."

Since 1948, male labor force participation has plummeted from 89 percent to 73 percent. Today, 27 percent of adult men do not consider themselves part of the workforce: "A large part of the jobs problem for American men today is not wanting one."